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SEXUALITY IN HISTORY – Postclassical Period

Contents

OVERVIEW

The big new variable in the history of sexuality during the postclassical centuries involved the spread and growing influence of the great missionary religions. Religion had affected sexuality before, of course, as with Hinduism and early Buddhism. Judaism had introduced an unusually firm emphasis on reproductive sex, with a variety of rules not only against extramarital sex but also against masturbation and homosexuality. However, most people in the world before the postclassical period were polytheists, and while polytheism could offer examples of the gods enjoying sex or seized with jealousy, it did not usually generate elaborate rules.

The missionary religions*.* As Buddhism spread more widely in the centuries after 500 CE, as Christianity not only spread but clarified its approach to sexuality, and as Islam first took shape, the role of religion in sexuality measurably increased in many parts of Asia, Europe and North Africa. (Conversions to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa were also significant, but Africans often downplayed the implications for sexuality at this point.) On the whole, the new religions pushed for greater sexual control, altering the approaches taken by the classical societies. But there was considerable variation from one faith to the other, and sometimes within. Further, it is not clear how many people significantly altered their ideas or behaviors.

Buddhism. Of the three major missionary religions, Buddhism proved the hardest to pin down. Buddhists vigorously urged renunciation of life's pleasures in favor of meditation and spiritual quest. Most monasteries and convents required celibacy, on pain of expulsion. But Buddhist lay people were not expected to avoid reproductive sex – their spiritual ventures were more sporadic and some also hoped that the virtues acquired by Buddhist saints would spill over to them. Furthermore, while Buddhism cautioned against indulgence, it did not set down detailed rules about sexual behavior; there was more room for individual interpretation.

Sex and spirituality*.* Finally, some Buddhist sects, including some monastic movements, actually incorporated sexual activity with their spiritual exercises. A movement called Tantric Buddhism developed a detailed set of sexual positions, sometimes associated with extreme yoga. Several monastic orders in Korea and particularly Japan were known for their sexual activities. A decentralized religion, Buddhism harbored an impressive variety of sexual approaches – though for most people the counsels of moderation were probably the most influential.

Christian struggles with sex*.* By the later stages of the Roman Empire Christianity developed the most distinctive, and hostile, approach to sexuality of all the major religions. Insistence that the mother of Christ was a virgin was already an interesting indication of the separation between sex and holiness. Early centuries of Christianity witnessed a number of hermits who loudly struggled with their sexuality in pursuit of spiritual advancement. St. Augustine, the most influential of the Western theologians, pointedly renounced an abandoned youth as he wrote of the dangers of sexual desire for the Christian.

Celibacy. The decision of the Western Church to require celibacy for priests, as well as monks and nuns, was a clear statement that chastity was the best path to salvation. And while most Christians were not expected to take this path – marriage itself was a sacrament – the Christian approach could enhance feelings of guilt. Not a few Christians, once married, abandoned their vows later in life in favor of entering a religious order. Christianity did produce a few religious aspirants who mixed sexual fantasies with their spiritual quest, but this was rarer than with Buddhism.

Orthodox approach. Eastern Christianity took a somewhat more modest approach, particularly in the decision that priests could marry. But monks were supposed to remain fiercely celibate; some Orthodox monasteries constructed elaborate arrangement to make sure that no women could approach.

Rules for behavior. Building on Judaism, Christianity also had a host of rules for the sexual behaviors of ordinary folks. Chastity before marriage; adultery was a sin; masturbation was a sin; and the Church came out unusually strongly against homosexuality.

Islam and pleasure. Islam ventured a somewhat different combination. There was no particular virtue in chastity. God had created the possibility for sexual activity and pleasure, and this should be honored. Islam was quite specific about the validity of sexual pleasure in marriage and the obligations for husbands to provide satisfaction for their wives. Visions of heaven even included a sexual component.

Rules and punishments. But this approach was balanced by a host of rules and punishments, most obviously against premarital or extramarital sex. During the holy month of Ramadan, sex was forbidden during daylight hours. Penalties could include stoning, though Islamic officials urged mercy and forgiveness where possible. Anal sex was forbidden, but same sex activity more generally was tolerated.

Public culture. All three religions, finally (with a few exceptions for Buddhism) urged against displays of sexuality in public art or literature – again, a significant shift from the patterns of the classical world.

Vice and variety. Predictably, religious strictures did not change everything. Prostitution for example continued to flourish, often in the same neighborhoods as a major mosque or church. Pornographic writings circulated as well, though slightly underground. The Arab Golden Age featured an array of literary works with sexual themes, and during the later Middle Ages sexual symbolism – for example, the rose as a symbol for the vagina – showed up in Western literature as well. These developments must be included in any overall synthesis of sex during the religious age.

Conclusion. This said, there is little question that the rise of the missionary religions altered rules for sexual behavior, dampened the public culture, and undoubtedly created new pressures for guilt or shame for some of the faithful.

RELIGION AND SEXUALITY

Religion, one of the key ingredients in most human culture and predominant in some, can offer three approaches to sexuality, either separately or in some combination. It can largely ignore sexual issues in favor of worshipping and conciliating various forces of nature. It is possible that many early animist religions had few direct sexual implications, which would have been consistent with some other aspects of hunting and gathering societies.

Or religion can embrace sexuality as entirely compatible with divinity, sometimes seeing sexual climax itself as an essentially religious experience. Linkage of this sort showed in Chinese Daoism, where sexuality was part of a spiritual connection to nature: desire, or sexual energy (*jing chi)* is part of the basic energy of life. While the Taoist approach created concerns about loss of semen, some Taoist groups viewed intercourse as an explicitly spiritual activity.

Or, finally, religion can view sexuality skeptically or even critically, worrying about the moral implications of sexual excess and concerned about the extent to which sexual pursuits distract from appropriate attention to the divine. In this final approach, virginity or celibacy can be highly valued as a sacrifice to the divine or as the best state in which to pursue transcendent religious goals. We have seen elements of both the embrace and the recoil in some of the religions covered within the classical societies.

Polytheism*.* Building on earlier animism, many polytheistic religions provided opportunities to model sexual goals and problems through characterizations of the gods and goddesses. Most polytheistic systems fully associated the gods with sexuality, rather than suggesting a deep gulf between human strivings and divine standards. The doings of the gods could highlight possibilities for sexual pleasure and delights of the body. But they also could connect sex with excess and disease, and they often vividly illustrated the links between sexuality and jealousy, and even outright conflict.

While polytheism on the whole suggested the normalcy of sexual expression, despite some risks, it could also generate some sense that devotion to celibacy, for a small group, might be an appropriate way to honor the gods.

Judaism*.* More clearly and consistently than any prior religion, Judaism, as it took shape in the centuries after about 1200 BCE, emphasized a single, all-powerful God. Unlike polytheism, monotheism created a massive gulf between the divine and the human; divinity was not tainted through any involvement with sexuality. Gone were the images of sexually cavorting gods and goddesses. Indeed, as the story of Genesis made clear, sexuality was visited on humans as part of the punishment for their sins of desire: Adam and Eve initially had no sexual impulses, and lived without shame in their mutual nudity.

At the same time, however, focus on a single God could highlight the importance of human reproduction, to create additional souls for service and worship – giving basic religious sanction to this key feature of sexuality in agricultural societies, as polytheism for the most part had not done.

These somewhat complex implications showed clearly as early Jewish views on sexuality were elaborated. Jewish sexual standards focused strongly on the importance of reproduction, and while this by no means precluded sexual pleasure it dramatically limited the ways in which pleasure could be sought. The result resembled sexual guidance in other cultures in many ways, but the regulatory limits loomed larger, at least in principle.

Core teachings*.* One of the leading duties stipulated in the Torah was the commandment to procreate: God wants the world to be populated, and men have a particular responsibility in this regard. Other commandments instructed men to provide pleasure for their wives (even if they are past childbearing age or are otherwise incapable of having children). Men were urged to stay home for at least a year after marriage, to establish a good sexual relationship. And sexual pleasure within marriage can be sought in virtually any way imaginable: Maimonides, a medieval philosopher, stated simply, “a man may do whatever he desires with his wife. He may engage in relations whenever he desires, he may kiss any organ he desires” – all provided however that he “does not release his seed in vain.” (Other material however urged against using any compulsion for a wife to have sex.) While the basic approach emphasized male initiative, and women were urged to remain “desirable” for their husbands, other guidance stressed female pleasure and the need for arousal, and even the desirability of assuring female orgasm first during marital sex. Maimonides also insisted that God created nothing ugly; “if we were to say that intercourse is repulsive, we blaspheme the God who made the genitals.”

Some tension was attached to this enthusiastic approach. Sexual activity was technically impure, and some sources urged that particularly pious people should abstain from sex. Moses kept separate from his wife during his prophetic leadership, either to avoid distraction or to maintain purity or both. And it was vital to maintain the ability to discipline sexual desire, if only to assure that it remain confined to marriage.

Prohibitions .Several potential sexual activities, however, were absolutely out of bounds: incest, male-male anal intercourse, bestiality, and sex during a wife’s menstrual period. The prohibitions most obviously reflected the intense focus on procreation as the ultimate sexual goal. Certain categories of people were also out of bounds in sexual relations, including sexual contacts between Jews and Gentiles. Masturbation was firmly proscribed, and since it wastes a potential future human being it was actually a form of murder. (Female masturbation was also reproved, but less intensely.) And extramarital sex was also forbidden, with a man who entices a single woman to have sex obligated normally to marry her afterward.

Strictures against homosexuality were intense. “Thou shall not lie with mankind…it is an abomination.” Any effort at marriage between two men invites divine punishment. Less attention was paid to same-sex activities among women, though they were also forbidden in principle.

The traditional Jewish approach to sexuality thus combined enthusiasm with an emphasis on an overriding purpose and a host of related prohibitions that could potentially compromise the enthusiasm – particularly for young people exposed most directly to the cautionary approach. This kind of tension was hardly unknown in other societies, but its religious base, rooted in God’s purposes and judgments, added a further dimension.

The idea of a religious age. The interaction between religion and sexuality is a consistent theme in world history, certainly important before and during the classical period, and vital in developments in more modern times. Contemporary studies show important correlations between particular religions and the frequency, or infrequency, of behaviors such as premarital or extramarital sex (in the contemporary world, Buddhists and then Muslims are least likely to engage in sex outside marriage, according to sociological surveys).

However, religion assumed particular importance in the centuries after the fall of the classical empires. It was during these centuries that Buddhism enjoyed its most rapid expansion, even as its role in India lessened: missionary efforts and new contacts promoted a Buddhist surge into Southeast Asia and also into China and from there to Korea and Japan. Christianity, a newer religion, gained ground rapidly in the later Roman Empire after Constantine began to provide state support in the early 4th century CE. Christians comprised about 10% of the Roman population before that point, but now moved forward rapidly. From this base, in turn, Christianity expanded into all parts of northern Europe by the 10th-12th centuries. Finally Islam, the newest of the world religions, arose after 600 and quickly spread through the Middle East and North Africa, and soon into India (as the largest minority faith), Central and Southeast Asia and parts of Africa.

The vigor of these religions, and their claim to appeal to all of humankind rather than just one people, gave them growing influence in areas ranging from politics and art to individual conduct. Religious change was not the only theme of the postclassical period (c.600-1450): interregional trade also expanded and there were a variety of regional political developments. And the power of religion varied, lower for example in China than most of the other Afro-Eurasian societies. Nor, finally, did individuals react to religious strictures identically, even within a single area. All this said, the missionary religions brought new factors into play concerning sexuality – though the changes were not identical among the three – and their expansion generated some durable new impulses. Alterations in sexual values and behaviors still operated within the basic framework of the Agricultural Age, but several of the innovations were striking.

Study questions:

1. Why is the subject of religion and sexuality likely to be complicated?
2. What were some key differences between the Jewish and the polytheistic approach to sexuality?
3. What were the implications of the Garden of Eden story for evaluations of sexuality?
4. How did the Jewish sexual code compare to common values in the various classical societies?

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Eros and the Jews: from biblical Israel to contemporary America. By David Biale (University of California Press, 1997).

The Sacred Encounter: Jewish perspectives on sexuality (CCAR Press, 2014).

Religion, the Body, and Sexuality: an introduction. By Nina Hoel, Melissa Wilcox, Liz Wilson. (Routledge, 2020.

BUDDHISM

Buddhism formed initially as a reaction against aspects of Hinduism, most obviously what Gautama Buddha saw as excessive Hindu commitment to ritual and the priestly role plus its embrace of the caste system. Buddhism also moved against some of the Hindu approaches to sexuality, though – just to complicate matters – Buddhist faithful might also replicate aspects of Hindu thinking and representation.

Sexuality as danger. At one level, Buddhism could seem unusually hostile to sexual interests. Buddha's first discourse, focused on craving as the key cause of human suffering, illustrates his warnings through sexuality:

" If one, longing for sensual pleasure, achieves it, yes, he's enraptured at heart. The mortal gets what he wants. But if for that person – longing, desiring – the pleasures diminish, he's shattered, as if shot with an arrow…So one, always mindful, should avoid sensual desires. Letting them go, he will cross over the flood like one who, having bailed out the boat, has reached the far shore."

Other early Buddhist comments pointed in the same direction: desire was like a tree laden with fruit but too dangerous to climb. The *Dazhidulum* clarified the admonition: "He who enjoys pleasures is never satisfied; he who is derived of them suffers greatly; When he does not possess them, he wants to possess them. When he possesses them, he is tormented."

Monasticism and gender. Correspondingly, most Buddhist religious orders – both male and female -- remained firmly celibate, with any violation a cause for expulsion. Similarly, Buddhist temples, far less elaborate than their Hindu counterparts in any event, dispensed with any explicit sensual imagery. The tone of Buddhist public and artistic culture was, usually, vastly different from Hindu patterns.

Concern about sexuality applied to specific comments concerning women: while the spirituality of individual women was praised, many stories offered warnings about women who led men into sexual temptation. An East Asian Buddhist story highlights a monk who fell in love with a courtesan; ridiculed in public, he lost all his spiritual power.

Complexities. Yet a number of further elements entered in, modifying what otherwise might seem an unusually bleak view. In the first place, while sex was certainly a good example of the snares of pleasure-seeking, it was not the only one. Some Buddhist leaders have been at pains to point out that sexual enjoyment was not distinctively worse than other kinds of superficial indulgence.

Further, while the Buddhist approach emphasized caution, it did not generate an elaborate list of do's and don'ts – except for a few admonitions to monks and nuns about specific practices to avoid. In contrast to the Abrahamic religions, all of which built on the Jewish impulse to develop specific regulations, Buddhism allowed considerable discretion, leaving decisions about particular sexual interests largely up to the individual or the specific community. A key Buddhist precept did warn against "sexual misconduct" but without detail. This could generate, among other things, wide differences of opinion about issues like same-sex involvement. Buddhists in general were instructed not to have sex with another's spouse or betrothed, with someone under age, or with a person vowed to celibacy, but that was about it. Nor, in contrast to Judaism, was there particular emphasis on focusing only on reproductive sex (which in principle could be just as disappointing as any other human striving).

East Asia. Lacking a single holy book or elaborate governing apparatus, Buddhism, as it expanded its geographic range, also generated a number of variants, and sexuality was one of the elements involved. In China, for example, Buddhists encountered concerns about the lack of emphasis on the family, and some adjustments were made to stress the importance of family life for most people. At the same time, even non-Buddhist Chinese sometimes found Buddhist sexual caution desirable, for example in disciplining wayward girls, who might be sent to Buddhist nuns for guidance.

Buddhism in Korea and particularly Japan often greatly modified the warnings about sexuality itself. Several Korean stories featured Buddhist holy men who indulged in sex without harming their sanctity. One, from the 12th century, even highlighted a monk who regularly visited brothels, but by being open about his desire suffered no spiritual damage. Other Buddhists might claim that their enjoyment of sex merely expressed a love for humanity, and so they were not defiled. Yet another story featured two

monks, one, celibate, was condemned because of false beliefs while the other, though committing immoral acts, won salvation because of his true faith.

Japanese monks were particularly likely to participate in sexual relationships, visiting prostitutes and sometimes maintaining longstanding relationships. Some claimed that this was a vital part of their spiritual quest. A Buddhist representation of the Hindu god Ganesha was worshipped by elements of the Japanese public, including women in the pleasure business. In the 12th century an extreme monastic order arose that explicitly used ejaculation in ritual, though this was ultimately condemned by mainstream Buddhists. More quietly, several Japanese Buddhist leaders preached that sex and love were paths to Enlightenment. And, unsurprisingly, in the Japanese context some Buddhist saints were worshipped as gods of love and sources of fertility.

Tantric Buddhism*.* Even outside Japan, Buddhist groups might directly associate sexual acts with spiritual goals. A variant called Tantric Buddhism developed in India, Tibet and elsewhere that – against the Buddhist norms – highlighted sexual intercourse in artistic representations of the ultimate reality, as a means of stimulating meditation practices and chants. While the female form, including the vagina, was central in these representations, most practitioners were male; women's bodies promoted Enlightenment, but a woman was rarely directly enlightened. Some forms of yoga were developed that also involved sexual expression. In some services a Tantric master had intercourse with a female acolyte and then used the resultant bodily fluids to anoint others. Over time (and into the modern era), this aberrant form of Buddhism could lead to a variety of sexual abuses, and also served to promote attacks on Buddhism more generally that greatly exaggerated the extent of sexual license. Many Buddhist leaders themselves condemned that Tantric approach and urged adherence to the original ascetic purposes.

Variety*.* The variety of sexual implications in Buddhism obviously complicates any overall evaluation. The overriding goal of seeking spiritual enlightenment and release from ordinary worldly concerns could lead to sexual restraint, including monastic asceticism or, simply, adherence to more common rules about avoiding adultery or premarital sex. A number of Buddhist variants sought to downplay female sexual pleasure, seeing the female body as impure and a source of temptation, leading to particular emphasis on the need for restraint. But for some, the goals of enlightenment and release incorporated sexual outlets directly, making sexuality one of several domains that highlighted the multiplicity of Buddhist styles. It is vital also to remember the absence of detailed rules about sexual behavior in the overall Buddhist approach, which could generate some tolerance for different sexual expressions.

The Buddhist mainstream*.* It is not easy to determine the general impact of the Buddhist approach to sexuality. The religion encouraged a minority toward asceticism, but it also, though more rarely, could steer another minority to incorporate sexuality into religious ritual. Many ordinary people, sincere Buddhists, might well conclude that the religion did not address sexuality particularly clearly, muting its impact and confirming older traditions about the importance of reproduction and male potency, or the need to keep a watchful eye over female behavior. At most, Buddhism might enhance a concern about undue emphasis on sexuality more generally, and it is important to remember that some people explicitly turned to monasteries to train sons and particularly daughters in restraint. The absence of specific regulations, apart from some monasteries, also played a role in popular interpretations. For the literate, Buddhism offered varied discussions on sexuality and even on sexual positions – depending on the specific sect – but it avoided detailed commentary on daily issues like birth control, homosexuality, abortion, masturbation or even the promotion of fertility. As a result, a "Buddhist approach" to sexuality is harder to define than would be the case with the other world religions.

Study questions:

1. How could Buddhism lead to contradictory extremes in dealing with sexuality?
2. What was the role of the monastic movement in Buddhist approaches to sexuality?
3. Did Buddhism promote major changes in sexual ideas and practices for the majority of the faithful?
4. Why did Buddhism, in the main, avoid detailed rules about sexual behavior?

Further reading:

The Different Paths of Buddhism: a narrative-historical introduction. By Carl Olson (Rutgers University Press, 2005).

Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and sex. By John Stevens (Shambhala pub., 1990).

Courtesans and Tantric Consorts: sexualities in Buddhist narrative, iconography and ritual. By Seinity Young (Routledge, 2005).

Buddhism, Sexuality and Gender. Ed. By J.I. Cabezon (State University of New York Pres, 1992).

CHRISTIANITY

Celibacy and mistrust*.* Perhaps the most striking feature of the Christian approach to sexuality, as it developed in the early centuries after the death of Christ, was the premium placed on celibacy as a path to religious reward and as a requirement for many if not all religious officials. Obviously this bore some resemblance to aspects of Buddhism, but it extended further and it was not complicated by any substantial impulse to link sexuality with spiritual advancement. Emphasis on the religious advantage of celibacy showed in the characteristic insistence of the virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus, but it would extend to the sexual denial of many early Christian hermits, some of whom wrote of their battles against sexual temptation. And as in Buddhism it would serve as a basic component in monasticism, in both the Eastern and Catholic versions of Christianity, but also ultimately, in the Western church, as a requirement for the priesthood.

Suspicion of sexuality was combined with a number of moral regulations, though many of these were less unusual. The Christian code sought to confine sex to marriage, opposing for premarital and extramarital sex. It viewed masturbation as a sin, at least in principle: sex should be for reproductive purposes. And although there is some debate over how quickly the aversion to homosexuality emerged, there is no question that a fierce opposition ultimately developed.

Causation*.* Several sources contributed to the Christian approach, which contrasted so strikingly with many of the standards and practices that had been widely accepted in the Greco-Roman world. Many of the regulatory features maintained prohibitions developed in Judaism. The larger suspicion of sexuality may have owed much to the Stoic philosophy that had blossomed during the Roman era and that urged the importance of restraint and moderation. Some individual experience may have entered in. The most influential Christian thinker in the Western church, Augustine of Hippo in the 5th century, had spent a rather wanton youth, but then, suddenly converted, renounced his sexual past with particular vigor, and played a significant role in bathing sexual urges and excesses in deep guilt. Augustine highlighted the Biblical precedents for the belief that sex itself was the result of human sin, not present in God's original creation but only the outcome of the violation of divine commandments.

Gender. The traditional Christian approach to sexuality was also informed by particular suspicion of female temptation. Women, though technically spiritually equal to men, were seen as the weaker vessel – which barred them from the priesthood, though if celibate they could certainly enjoy a holy life in convents. Control of female sexuality, beginning with virginity at marriage, was vitally important, though in this respect Christianity shared attitudes with many other religions and cultures in the Agricultural Age.

Eunuchs and mystics. Christians were more hesitant about the use of eunuchs than was true in some other cultures. On the one hand their celibacy was welcome (and assured), on the other castration might seem extreme. But eunuchs were granted a significant role in the Byzantine Empire. And in the West, castrated male singers (castradi) ultimately gained great prestige for their vocal skills, with primary emphasis on religious music – their sexuality sacrificed to the powerful sounds they could generate.

Christianity did not produce monastic branches that saw sexuality as part of religious expression, in contrast to Buddhism (though monks in some cases hardly lived up to their vows). But in Western Europe during the Middle Ages some individual mystics, perhaps particularly women, had intense sexual visions as part of their religious ecstasy, and in some cases wrote about this movingly. One, Hildegard of Bingen, extended her views to include the importance of sexual pleasure, for women, within marriage, vividly

describing female orgasm and claiming that children conceived amid sexual pleasure were more likely than others to be strong – and male.

Marriage ambivalence. Marriage, in the Christian view, was double-edged: it was tainted, at least normally, by its association with sex, but it was infinitely preferable to ungoverned sexuality. And in the Eastern Orthodox version of Christianity, priests themselves were allowed to marry, one of the basic disagreements between the two main Christian branches that contributed to their schism in the 11th century (though there was no dispute about the celibate basis for monasticism; some Eastern monasteries even banned women from coming close to their property).

Ambivalence about marriage abounded in the early centuries of the religion. St. Jerome, in the 4th century, ventured a common opinion among Christian thinkers: marriage was vastly preferable to fornication, but it was clearly second best to celibacy. Jerome urged husbands and wives to seek celibacy within marriage and to urge it on any children they bore (particularly daughters). Jerome warned against too much husbandly devotion; undue sex within marriage was clearly a sin in its own right.

Compromise. In practice, most Christians did have sex at some points in their lives, and the main churches established abundant paths to salvation even for the noncelibate. As in most agricultural societies, many families took great pride in having a number of children. Some people, as in Buddhism, probably hoped for spiritual benefit from worshipping saints who were celibate. And it is possible that more Christians faced greater moral ambivalence about their actual impulses and behaviors than was true in many other cultures – though this is impossible to measure precisely. Not a few older people, with sufficient resources, turned away from family life in later age and entered a religious institution, seeking the best of both worlds. And all Christians, married or not, were urged to abstain from sex during holy periods, particularly in the 40 days before Easter – another interesting compromise.

Family morality. As Christianity increasingly entered the mainstream, from the 4th century onward, church officials, while maintaining the valuation of celibacy, devoted growing energy to supporting but also regulating the family, beginning with the fact that marriage itself was a sacrament – though insistence that undue sex even within marriage was immoral persisted. The great emphasis was on the importance of confining sex to marriage and placing primary emphasis on reproduction. And on the whole this approach, not in itself uncommon, was combined with less attention to the possibility of pleasure as a side effect than was true in other cultures. Some ideas circulated that clothing should not be removed during sex or that only one position was valid – man on top, presumably to maximize male control and opportunities for conception.

Rules. Christian emphasis on family and reproduction highlighted a number of common proscriptions. Adultery was firmly proscribed, and while female adulterers drew the greatest attention males were included as well. (Women were more commonly excommunicated from the church for adultery.) In Western Europe a man convicted of adultery could lose his rights to his wife's dowry. Abortion was attacked, punishable by death in England for example (though actual cases were rare). Masturbation, or "wasting of the seed", was another target; a person should fast for 20 days if he indulged in the practice, and other punishments, including flagellation, were sometimes recommended (for example, for women who used devices to pleasure themselves). Thomas Aquinas, a leading theologian, argued that masturbation was an offense worse than rape since it contradicted both reason and nature, whereas rape only offended reason. And of course strong arguments urged against premarital sex.

Public culture. Christian morality strongly limited public representations or discussions of sexuality, driving most of them underground – a marked contrast to the traditions of the classical Mediterranean. Materials did circulate, including bawdy stories and sex manuals describing various possible positions for pleasure. Sexual symbolism, including the rose to represent the vagina, also emerged, and became more common with the rise of cities and other developments. Stories about cuckolds, describing men who could not retain their wives' fidelity, were also common, suggesting the unofficial importance of masculine prowess.

Prostitution. Christian moralists obviously disapproved of prostitution, both for the women involved and for the temptation for male sin. Primary attention was directed toward the women themselves – though there were redeeming stories of prostitutes who mended their ways – but men who used prostitutes were

occasionally singled out; a Byzantine law allowed wives to divorce husbands who visited prostitutes. Christian officials might also occasionally admit that prostitution might usefully curb male lust, protecting against extramarital affairs. And in fact, prostitution flourished in Christian Europe, especially as cities grew – reflecting the difficulty single women might have in supporting themselves by other means. Immigrant women were not uncommonly forced to resort to prostitution. The Christian dilemma over prostitution was not unusual, but it highlighted the limitations of official sexual morality in practice.

Homosexuality*.* Efforts to outlaw homosexuality may have had greater impact, for the Christian position on this subject became increasingly severe. Homosexual activity certainly did not stop, but it was definitely driven underground. In this domain, strictures against men were particularly severe, around the sin of sodomy, "that incontinence which is against nature." At least a few men were executed (by burning) for the offense. Several laws, including one in the Byzantine Empire, also decreed the death penalty. On the other hand, regions like southern Europe were long regarded as more prone to homosexuality, probably reflecting earlier Mediterranean traditions.

Practical impact. Christian moral strictures clearly had varying degrees of success in practice, as the differences between fairly open prostitution and the limits on fully extirpating homosexuality suggest. Interest in contraception and even abortion remained, mainly through uses of medicinal plants, though as always effectiveness might be limited (several texts provided information about herbal potions). Many penalties officially on the books were not rigorously enforced, particularly for acts like masturbation and abortion, and even homosexuality was not always punished. And of course much sexual behavior was simply concealed, in a very decentralized society. In many villages and cities more traditional enforcement – often involving public shaming, rather than efforts to instill guilt – sought to limit adultery and premarital sex, and this may well have counted for more than religious strictures. Finally, Christianity, along with its various suspicions of sexuality, also urged forgiveness, particularly when an offense was followed by true repentance, and this could also factor into impacts in practice.

Conclusion The tone that Christianity set for sexuality was vastly different from earlier classical precedents in Europe and other parts of the Mediterranean. Public cultural shifted. Homosexuality was far more marginalized. Some upper-class behaviors changed: while wealthy men still sometimes took mistresses, open use of concubines (or younger men), clearly declined. In the later Middle Ages, in Western Europe, an ideal of courtly love developed that praised emotional passion but removed from sex (at least in principle). Sexual misdeeds, as religiously defined, could be attacked more vehemently than before. Some of these patterns, or at least strong residues, have persisted into our own time, at least in some Christian circles, so the innovations had impacts beyond the postclassical period itself.

Study questions:

1. Why and how did Christian views about homosexuality depart from earlier Mediterranean patterns?
2. What are the principal problems in evaluating the Christian impact on actual sexual behavior? What behaviors were most likely to reflect Christian standards?
3. Why did Christianity place a high value on celibacy?
4. What were the two most important innovations in the Christian approach to sexuality?
5. What were the main differences between Christian and Jewish views on sexuality?
6. What are the main similarities and differences between Christian and Buddhist sexual values?

Further reading:

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ISLAM AND SEXUALITY

The Prophet said: "'When one of you has sex with your wife, it is a rewarded act of charity.' The Companions were surprised and said, 'But we do it purely out of desire. How can it be counted as charity?' The Prophet replied: "If you had done it with a forbidden woman, it would have been counted as la sin, but if you do it legitimately, it is counted as charity.'"

" If *Fahisha* (promiscuity or sexual immorality) appears among a people to such an extent that they commit it openly, plagues and diseases that were never known among their predecessors will spread among them."

Basic approach*.* Islam's distinctive approach to sexuality combined acceptance of sexuality and even sexual pleasure within marriage, or for men with concubines, with an unusually strong effort to prevent, or punish, sexual expressions outside that context. No special value was placed on lifelong celibacy but a variety of measures were introduced to channel sexual activity, particularly for women – with marriage setting the basis for the highest spiritual state for both parties. Compared to Christianity or Buddhism, it was a distinctive combination.

The Islamic view of heaven reflected the positive view of sexuality, for it would be filled with delights (though, in the popular view, most obviously for men, who would have an array of partners) – one of the rewards for religious observance in this life. And during life, sensual love was an appropriate, if obviously incomplete, accompaniment to striving for the love of God. Only one spinoff sect in the 9th century, Khraji, placed any religious value on celibacy. For most Muslims, only during the holy month of Ramadan should marital activity be curbed -- from dawn to dusk, along with access to food and drink, as part of religious renewal; here, Islam joined other major faiths in seeing religious merit in periodic control over appetite.

Centrality of marriage. Marriage was the vital institution to channel sexual desire appropriately. The theologian al-Gahazli, writing in the 11th century, saw marriage as a means of "the overcoming of carnal desire", protecting those involved from the devil. Some Islamic writings urged men to limit sexual activity with wives, aiming primarily at procreation, but more commonly marriage – reflecting the ideas of the Prophet – was seen as a union of a chaste man and a chaste woman for whom sexual congress was really an act of worship. Any form of sexual activity was permitted within marriage except anal intercourse or sex during menstruation. Husbands should provide ample foreplay and wait for their wives' orgasm before enjoying their own; a number of writers consistently highlighted the importance of female sexual fulfillment. Here, obviously, was a marked difference from the more restrained Christian approach. Wives, in turn, should be responsive to their husbands' requests.

Gender. However, Islamic ideas on marriage and sex featured other types of gender differentials, in addition to the characteristic intensity of insistence on female purity before marriage. (While in principle Islam stipulated consent for marriage, in fact in many Muslim societies women were often committed to marriage very young.) Men with sufficient means could take more than one wife, and concubinage was also permitted. Gradually also, the custom of veiling respectable women in public also gained ground in the Middle East, to help protect women's virtue and shield them from unwanted attention – with no comparable restrictions on men.

Birth control*.* While Islam stressed the duty of having children when possible, the focus on reproductive sex was less intense than with Christianity. As one result, traditional Islam took a fairly tolerant stance toward abortion and birth control (the Prophet Muhammed believed that a soul was involved only in the final stages of fetal development). Laws recognized that economic conditions or other factors might cause a need for birth control, and since sexual pleasure was a valid goal in itself there was no need for interference. Birth control options were of course imperfect, but herbal concoctions were available for

some, and the practice of *coitus interruptus* could also be utilized. And while masturbation was regarded as a sin, it was not a major offense.

Adultery. On the other hand, opposition to adultery was intense, with both men and women subject to harsh punishment sometimes including death. The *Qur'an* made it clear: "the fornicatress and the fornicator – scourge each of them with a hundred stripes." Technically, proof of adultery required several witnesses, and Islamic authorities also urged the importance of forgiveness. But husbands often took it upon themselves to punish real or imagined offenses by wives or daughters.

Homosexuality*.* Views toward homosexuality were complex. Anal sex was definitely proscribed. The *Qur'an* also included more general passages that urged home confinement for homosexual activity unless there was repentance, and some Islamic scholars recommended a death penalty Others argued, however, that the Prophet never specified a death penalty and in fact, given traditions in the Middle East and a thriving urban culture, considerable homosexual activity did occur during the early centuries of Islam in the Middle East. Cross-dressing was also a popular form of entertainment in some circles, and some male prostitution flourished. Some visions of heaven included access to boys, "white as snow". Lesbian contacts drew less attention than male behavior, and there were rumors of considerable lesbian activity amid member of royal harems.

Public culture*.* Islam proscribed representational art in principle, though not primarily for sexual reasons. But written materials frequently tackled sexuality, particularly during the Arab "Golden Age" of the 8th-11th centuries; and while most authors were male, there were some contributions by women. A variety of sexual manuals circulated, some offering a variety of suggestions about increasing male potency or penis size. Love poetry flourished, and while some stressed ethereal passions, other references were more explicit: "You spread out her legs and go into her." The famous *1001 Nights* included many sexual themes, including stories of women's infidelity that emphasized how the gender was dominated by passion. Homosexual pleasure might also be praised.

Impact. As with Christianity, the Islamic approach to sexuality was not fully translated into reality. Most obviously, rulers and other wealthy men often kept substantial harems, importing consorts from various conquered territories or simply utilizing enslaved women. Prostitution was technically banned, but flourished in fact. Some prostitutes, both slave and free, also served as entertainers, and could win considerable prestige. And some Islamic references granted the utility of prostitutes in curbing male lust.

Conclusion As with the other world religions, Islam confirmed many of the core features of sexuality in the Agricultural Age, interacting with earlier precedents in a number of ways. At the same time, a number of emphases were distinctive, and some would persist into modern times. The wide geographical spread of Islam also brought the religion into contact with different regional traditions. Islamic rulers in India accepted a number of Hindu patterns of sexual enjoyment, and there was little effort to interfere with sexual standards among the Hindu majority – including artistic expression. On the other hand, Islam encouraged considerable domestic seclusion of respectable women, and this practice – *purdah* – gained ground among Hindus as well. On the other hand as Islam spread to parts of West Africa, it did not immediately impose Middle Eastern customs concerning sexuality; women behaved more freely and they did not always cover their breasts – all of which shocked Middle-Eastern visitors.

Overall, the "religious age" in world history saw the development of a number of innovations in sexual culture and practice, amid important variations with the three major religions involved. None of the religions had the full impact on sexuality that their leaders hoped, but they did create significant change – and new kinds of concerns even when behaviors did not measure up. And while religious attitudes might shift further in subsequent centuries, a serious legacy remains visible today. Finally the differences among the religions, could promote a variety of sharp moral critiques when there were mutual interactions – another theme that echoes still.

Study questions:

1. What were the major complexities in the Islamic approach toward sexuality in women?
2. How did Islamic and Christian attitudes toward sexual pleasure compare?
3. Why was adultery singled out so vigorously?

4. What were the main ambiguities in the approach toward homosexuality?
5. Did the major religions have any impact on prostitution? Why, or why not?

Further reading:

Love, Sex and Marriage: insights from Judaism, Chrstianity and Islam. By Dan Cohn-Sherbok, George Chryssides, and Dawoud El-Alami (Hymns Ancient and Modern, 2013).

Islam and Sex. By Abdullah Ulwan (Darus Salam, 2002).

Sexuality in Islam. By Abdelwahab Bouhdiba (Routledge, 2007).

Women in the Middle East. By Nikki Keddie (Princeton University Press, 2007).

Before Homosexuality in the Arab-Islamic World (University of Chicago Press, 2005